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SUBJECT: MONITORING VISIT TO ETHNIC MINORITY RETURNEES AND VISAS-93  
BENEFICIARIES IN GIA LAI PROVINCE

REF: HCMC 1185

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¶1. (SBU) Summary and Comment: During a visit to the Central Highlands province of Gia Lai from October 10-12, PolOff, accompanied by the French Polcouns, met with 10 ethnic minority returnees and the families of two others in their homes. No government officials participated in our visits with returnees, although ethnic minority village elders with varying degrees of proficiency in Vietnamese were present.

¶2. (SBU) None of the returnees complained of mistreatment, although three returnees who appeared to be affiliated with the ethnic minority separatist movement did face additional police scrutiny. All but one of the returnees said they were Protestant; those affiliated with the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam said they were able to gather and worship freely. Most of the returnees appeared to be economic migrants. State-owned coffee and rubber plantations have become a critical source of employment for many ethnic minority villagers, including some returnees, although there is a strong undercurrent of resentment that these plantations displaced ethnic minorities from their traditional slash-and-burn farmlands. The returnees' lack of education, inability to find or hold sustainable employment, teenage pregnancy, land pressures and dependency on government handouts are emblematic of the challenges in trying to break the cycle of ethnic minority poverty and alienation in the Central Highlands.

¶3. (SBU) Separately, HCMC Refugee Resettlement Section (RRS) and DHS officers visited four VISAS-93 beneficiary families in Gia Lai who were long term no-shows for interviews in HCMC. This was the first time that we have made a successful visit to VISAS-93 beneficiaries in the Central Highlands. In some of these cases, family members and advocates in the U.S. claimed that the families were banned from traveling to the HCMC for interviews, were prevented from receiving written communication from RRS, and faced serious harassment at home. Although local officials were present during our meetings, family members appeared relaxed. We saw no evidence of mistreatment. All the families had received the bulk of mail sent from RRS HCMC. The visit highlighted the real difficulties that local government officials face in attempting to issue accurate civil documents to illiterate individuals in remote areas of the Central Highlands. Reftel reports on religious freedom and security issues in Gia Lai. End Summary and Comment.

Returnee Visits  
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¶4. (SBU) During a visit to Gia Lai Province October 10-12, provincial officials facilitated ConGen access to ten returnees and the families of two others in their homes in Duc Co and Chu

Se districts of Gia Lai Province. All were ethnic Jarai involuntary returnees. Education levels were very low, with most having no or minimal schooling. The conversations were conducted in Vietnamese by ConGen staff. At the insistence of the provincial government, local ethnic minority village elders were present for the interviews, although in some cases, the elders did not appear to speak Vietnamese. With the exception of one family, all the returnee homes had electricity. None complained of physical abuse or severe harassment following their return. Most received at least some government assistance or were sufficiently above the poverty line not to qualify for assistance.

15. (SBU) In our interviews we focused on:

-- the returnee's living conditions prior to going to Cambodia, including employment and land ownership (we also sought information on marital status, family size, education and religion);

-- the circumstances surrounding the returnee's decision to travel to Cambodia and the mechanics thereof;

-- the returnee's life in Vietnam since returning, including any bad or unfair treatment by officials, ostracism by neighbors, and government assistance to help with reintegration.

16. (SBU) Rolan Pleo (MTN-646), age 21, was the son of one of the Jarai village elders in Ba village. He returned to Vietnam in February 2006. His father was a member of the Viet Cong, as were the other ethnic minority leaders of the village. Rolan Pleo had no schooling; neither did five of his seven other siblings. Pleo worked in his father's five acres of corn, rice and cassava fields. His two marginally educated siblings -- sixth and third grades -- have jobs in the local rubber plantation, earning from VND 400,000 to 800,000 per month (USD 24 to USD 48), depending on productivity. Pleo indicated that he fled primarily for economic reasons after being encouraged by "activists" from neighboring villages.

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17. (SBU) Ksor Nuyen (MTN-638), age 20, told us that he "followed lots of people" to Cambodia. He is one of nine siblings, none of whom had any education. He does not follow a religion. He returned from Cambodia because "he missed his family." He works on his father's seven-acre cassava and cashew farm. The family has a motorbike, a television and one cow. Upon his return to Vietnam in February 2006, he spent one day at the district police station being questioned about his reasons for leaving and his stay in Cambodia. He also was "invited" once to meet with communal officials some months after his return. He was not/not required to attend any public "self-criticism" session in his village after his return.

18. (SBU) Rolan Kam (MTN-494), 19, married with one child, met us in her home with her parents and siblings. She told us that she went to Cambodia with her infant child, her 13-year old sister and two other family members. One aunt was resettled in the United States. UNHCR reportedly offered Kam resettlement as well, but she and her younger sister decided to return and rejoin her family. (The family did appear to be very close.) Since their return in July 2005, her sister gave birth to a child; the father is another boy in the village. Upon return, she was interviewed for two days by district and local officials. Her family received salt, gasoline and rice from the government. Kam works in the local rubber plantation as a latex collector, earning from VND 500,000 to 700,000 per month (USD 32 to USD 55).

19. (SBU) Kam's father told us that, in the past, a large number of villagers left for Cambodia, but the flow has ebbed in recent months. Kam's family and most others in their village -- an estimated 600 -- are Protestants affiliated with the SECV. They are able to gather to worship without restriction and do so three times a week.

¶10. (SBU) Rolan Hoi (MTN-501) met us in his newly constructed home with his wife, two children and sister-in-law. Hoi has a fifth-grade education. His wife and his sister-in-law are uneducated and do not speak Vietnamese. The entire group left for Cambodia for economic reasons, he told us. The family paid VND 700,000 (USD 45) for the crossing. There about 50 persons in the group. Once in Cambodia, he and his family were told by UNHCR that they did not qualify for resettlement. Upon return in July 2005, he spent one day working with police in the provincial capital of Pleiku and a second day with village authorities. He was visited twice by border police, who "encouraged" him to focus on making a living. He sometimes assists his wife who has a job as a collector at the local rubber plantation, where they make between VND 400,000 and 500,000 per month (USD 25 to 31). He also owns one acre of cassava. His sister-in-law is unemployed. Since his return he has received rice, tin roofing, blankets, mosquito netting, instant noodles and soap from government authorities. Hoi and his family belonged to the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV). He and other villagers were able to gather freely to worship.

¶11. (SBU) Rahlan Uoch (MTN-673), 21, was the most impoverished ethnic minority individual we had met in our dozen visits to the Central Highlands over the past two years. In contrast to the other villagers, the tiny hut where we met her and her baby girl had no electricity and was virtually devoid of possessions. She spoke very little Vietnamese. Uoch apparently married after her return to Vietnam in April 2006. She worked part time in the rubber plantation, earning "very little." She was not interviewed by local authorities upon her return to Vietnam, but received rice from local authorities. Asked about her state of destitution, local officials explained that Uoch and her husband recently moved out of their family homes to establish a new household. Her husband worked as an itinerant laborer.

Son of a FULRO Activist  
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¶12. (SBU) Rahlan Hung (MTN-651), 21, met us at his parents' relatively prosperous home in Chan village in Duc Co District. On the verge of tears, Hung told us that his wife divorced him after he decided to cross to Cambodia against her wishes. Since his return in February 2006, he had tried but failed to get a job at the local rubber plantation, as officials told him he could not qualify with only a fourth-grade education. He tends his family's 1.3 acre gardens and cassava farm. Hung said UNHCR offered him third-country resettlement, but he did not want to leave his family behind.

¶13. (SBU) Hung told us that his father was a former combatant in the ethnic minority separatist "FULRO" movement. His father traveled to another village to participate in the anti-GVN protests in 2001 and 2004. His father was arrested three times.

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Hung refused to tell us whether his father remained active in the FULRO movement, but noted that local authorities keep a close eye on his family. Following his father's lead, Hung said that he "abandoned" Protestantism, but he acknowledged that the SECV was able to operate freely in the village. Upon his return to Vietnam, Hung was held for three days and two nights at the provincial level and another day at the district level, where he was questioned carefully about his reasons for crossing to Cambodia and his family's activities. Since his return, police have visited him seven times, questioning him for approximately one hour each time. There was no physical violence during any of his questioning sessions, but police officials "yelled at him," telling him not to try and flee again.

¶14. (SBU) Siu Huy (MTN-204), 25, told us that he "followed people" to Cambodia because he heard that economic conditions were better across the border. A 9th-grade graduate, Huy works with his wife in the local rubber plantation earning from VND 300,000 to one million (USD 20 to 60) monthly. He tried to get

a job with the local state-owned coffee plantation but was not hired. Upon his return from Cambodia in July 2005, he was interviewed in the provincial capital of Pleiku for two days. Local officials also visited him three times. He received tin roofing for his home from local authorities. Huy's family is Protestant. They face no restriction on worship.

¶15. (SBU) Ksor Gai (MTN-493), 42, told us that he crossed to Cambodia with his sixth-grade daughter after he lost his rice harvest in a flood. Gai paid VND two million (USD 125) for the crossing. Gai is Protestant; he and other villagers have not faced any restrictions on religious practice this year. Upon his return in July 2005, Gai was interviewed by local border police who verbally threatened him with physical harm should he attempt to flee to Cambodia again. Gai also complained that he did not receive any assistance from government officials. The local officials explained that Gai's household was relatively wealthy. Gai acknowledged that he owned nearly two acres of coffee and cassava as well as nine cows.

Dega Activist  
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¶16. (SBU) Kpuih Hoang (MTN-700), 28, self-identified as a member of the "Dega Protestant Church" since 1999. Hoang complained that the government "took the traditional village lands" when they created a new coffee plantation nearby in 1997. He used to work for the plantation, but quit after some time because the coffee plantation "did not pay enough and did not acknowledge all his labor."

¶17. (SBU) Hoang said that he participated in the anti-GVN protests in 2001 and 2004 and was detained by police for 20 days in 2004. He has four young children between the ages of one and eight. He has a second-grade education; his wife never went to school. He has three-quarters of an acre of rice, cassava and pepper and two cows. Upon his return from Cambodia in April 2006, he was held for two days of questioning in the provincial capital of Pleiku. He also has been visited frequently by local ethnic Jarai police, who warn that he will be arrested if he participates in separatist activities or if he attempts to cross again to Cambodia. He has not received any assistance from the government since his return. After his return, he refused to seek work at the local state-owned coffee plantation. Unlike many other returnees, Hoang said that he did not pay to cross to Cambodia. He was not offered resettlement by UNHCR.

¶18. (SBU) Hoang said that 20 families in his village are affiliated with the Dega Protestant Church. They are not allowed to gather. He acknowledged that the SECV has a presence in the village and that SECV members do not face restrictions.

¶19. (SBU) Siu Gin, 22, told us that he paid VND one million (USD 60) to travel to Cambodia. Gin finished fourth grade. His uncle, who was earlier resettled in the United States, encouraged him to cross because "life in the village was difficult." He was rejected for resettlement by UNHCR and returned home in April 2006. He was questioned for two days in Pleiku before being returned home. Since his return, Gin has married a relatively wealthier woman and now farms her two acres of rice and pepper. He received rice, gasoline, and canned tuna from local officials. He has been visited twice by local officials since his return home.

Where is Siu Nham?  
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¶20. (SBU) ConGenOffs visited the family of Siu Nham (MTN-406), a returnee who "disappeared" some time after his return from Cambodia in July 2005. Siu Nham's case was first raised by the

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EU in November 2005, after another returnee suggested to visiting EU officials that Nham had been beaten. At that time, officials told the EU representatives that Nham was "working in

the fields."

¶21. (SBU) Siu Nham's wife and father maintained that they had not seen Siu Nham since he "fled" roughly around September 2005.

However, they did not appear at all concerned about his absence. Moreover, Nham's wife had a three-month old child that she and her father-in-law adamantly maintained was Siu Nham's. During our visit, the local ethnic Jarai village elder made a speech clearly directed at the family "saying were Siu Nham to return, his safety would be guaranteed." Separately, the Chu Se District People's Committee Chairman told us that he had recently delivered a letter to Siu Nham and his family personally guaranteeing that Nham would face no repercussions for his absence should he voluntarily return. Referring to Nham's "disappearance," the Chairman told us that officials know where ethnic minority individuals go "to hide," but refrain from approaching them so as to minimize tensions as much as possible.

Siu Nham's family told us that they had been practicing "Dega Protestantism," but had been told to stop by local officials. (Comment: Whatever the reasons for Siu Nham's flight, it appears an open secret in the district that he is alive and reasonably well. End Comment.)

#### VISAS-93 Visits

¶22. (SBU) Separately, RRS Chief and CIS Chief visited four Visas-93 beneficiary families that had been identified for follow-up in the field. In one case, RRS had been waiting for over a year for the family to obtain passports. Three other families were among the seven long-term "no show for interview" (NSI) cases. The ethnic Bahnar beneficiary in Ho Luk village, Ko Dang commune, Dak Doa district told us that she had received earlier invitations for interviews from RRS, but had not traveled to HCMC because she had "no money." However, she would attend her interview scheduled for 18 October. She already was issued a passport.

¶23. (SBU) An ongoing family dispute explains why the beneficiaries of a case in Dak Ioh village, Dok So Me commune, Dak Doa District had not responded to RRS interview invitations for over a year. The principal applicant told us that several months ago her husband in the United States had informed her that he only wanted their two middle sons to get a job. He said he could not support the entire family in the United States because his wife is illiterate and unable to work. As the primary beneficiary wanted to keep the family together, she had suspended processing. We found her explanation and demeanor credible, but will follow-up with the anchor. The anchor has sent money that the family has used to improve their house, which was larger and more prosperous looking than those of most neighbors.

¶24. (SBU) A CIS adjudicator had approved the case of a family living in Lang Mor village, Dok ToVer commune, Dak Doa District for resettlement to the United States over a year ago, but the family had not yet received its passports. RRS received reports that unspecified local officials had told the family that they would not get their passports unless they paid a bribe of USD 3,000.

¶25. (SBU) The principal applicant is illiterate and does not speak Vietnamese, so a village elder translated. According to the principal applicant, there were discrepancies and gaps in their birth certificates and family register records. Sorting out the differences had taken a great deal of time. Accompanying officials told us that the family's passports had been approved and that the family would get them the following day. The family's house was larger and better furnished than those of most neighbors. The family plans for the now-married eldest son to stay in Vietnam.

¶26. (SBU) A family of seven beneficiaries in the remote Plei Plor village, Ia Lau commune, Chu Prong District, live in a single-room tin roofed wooden home. The family has a two or three hectare cashew farm. The anchor in this case has repeatedly expressed concern that his family was being prevented from leaving the village, that letters and telexes from RRS had



not been delivered, and that one of his daughters (said to be eleven years old) had been imprisoned for two months and poisoned.

¶27. (SBU) We began our interview by attempting to identify the family members: the anchor's wife, three older daughters, and two younger sons. It became apparent that the precise birthdates supplied on the beneficiaries' respective I-730 application forms were conjectural. None of the beneficiaries

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appeared to know their birthdates or even their ages. For example, the principal applicant said her youngest son was about eighteen, but he appeared to be nine or ten. All three daughters are married, although listed as single on the I-730 form prepared by the anchor in the United States. One of the daughters was the young woman who reportedly was imprisoned and poisoned. She appeared healthy, in her late teens, and was nursing a baby. None of the family members made any claims of harassment, although there were a large number of officials present during our meeting. For example, the principal applicant said that she traveled to Pleiku whenever her husband sent money, most recently in July, when she received USD 200. She stated that she had received three messages from RRS (out of five sent), but that she had not come for a prescreening appointment because "she could not afford to do so." (A return trip bus ticket from the area to HCMC reportedly costs VND 300,000, or USD 20.)

¶28. (SBU) The family and local officials told us that they are still attempting to sort out discrepancies in names and dates of birth so that the beneficiaries can receive birth certificates. The principal applicant kept in touch with her husband in the U.S. via cell phone. The phone showed a number of overseas calls, the most recent from earlier in the day of our visit.  
WINNICK